

STATE OF MAINE
PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

Docket No. 99-132

March 9, 1999

MAINE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION
INVESTIGATION INTO BELL
ATLANTIC - MAINE'S NETWORK CONGESTION
RELIEF PRACTICES

ORDER OPENING
INVESTIGATION

WELCH, Chairman; NUGENT, and DIAMOND Commissioners

I. SUMMARY

In this Order, we open an investigation into the manner in which Bell Atlantic - Maine (Bell Atlantic or Company) is planning for, monitoring and relieving traffic congestion on its network, specifically through its central offices. We also will examine how Bell Atlantic has responded to customers' complaints about lack of dial tone, slow dial tone speed, excessive busy signals, call drops while in progress and ringing with no party on the line. This includes BA's communication with Internet service providers (ISPs) and interexchange carriers in responding to customers' complaints.

II. BACKGROUND

In early December 1998, a customer engaged in a mail-order business in Houlton informed the Commission's Consumer Assistance Division (CAD) about numerous problems with her phone service, including calls dropped in progress, inability of customers to get through and ringing of the line when no caller was present. In early February 1999, CAD became aware of three other businesses in the Houlton area having problems with long waiting times for dial tones and with the failure of calls to go through as dialed. CAD records show similar complaints from customers in Berwick (698 exchange).

The Commission sent a letter to the President of Bell Atlantic on February 12, 1999, asking for immediate attention to the problem in Houlton and a response to the letter by February 19, 1999. Bell Atlantic asked for additional time to respond and filed a written answer on February 24, 1999. The response claims that Bell Atlantic has been aware of the Houlton congestion, but has not yet been able to wholly correct the problem. According to the Company, a large ISP in Houlton is a "significant contributor" to the overload condition and BA "is presently negotiating" with the ISP to

convert its lines to Flexpath service. BA claims this will offer an interim solution until new capacity can be installed in mid-April.

In response to the problem of one specific Houlton business customer, Bell Atlantic simply states that it “continues to be unsuccessful in determining the actual cause of the customer’s problem and has not identified the office congestion as the problem.” With regard to Berwick, Bell Atlantic claims that additional capacity was added for the Berwick area in January 1999 and even more capacity is planned for March 1999. Bell Atlantic concludes that it will continue to monitor and balance central offices on the theory that “much of the congestion problems we are experiencing today are directly impacted by the busy season of the offices.”

On March 2, 1999, Bell Atlantic filed another letter stating that it was addressing a number of incidents of network congestion caused by Internet traffic growth. This is being done by moving ISPs to the trunk side of the switch, through contracts for PRI and Flexpath. With regard to Houlton, one Internet provider will move to PRI in 10 days. In the meantime, the customer agreed to eliminate certain Centrex lines on February 26, 1999, which resulted in improved switch performance, according to the Company.

III. DISCUSSION AND DECISION

Bell Atlantic’s responses do not fully put to rest our concern that several areas around the State, and in particular Houlton, are experiencing inadequate service. Customers must have a dial tone¹ when they pick up the receiver; this is critical to health and safety. In addition, a number of businesses may be being harmed by poor services. Maine, and in particular the more rural parts of the State, cannot afford a loss of revenue or jobs due to inadequate basic utility infrastructure. Neither BA response makes clear whether the actions the Company has taken to date have relieved the congestion problems in Houlton. The response to the one particular customer, that it has been unsuccessful in determining the cause of the problem, is wholly inadequate. It is also unclear what is meant by claims that these problems are exacerbated by the busy or winter season. The system should be sized to meet demand, regardless of season.

We open this investigation to determine:

¹ Dial tone speed must be within the standards set out in Bell Atlantic’s Alternative Form of Regulation (AFOR), as amended. See New England Telephone and Telegraph Company, Petition for a Waiver of the Service Quality Index Applicable to Dial Tone Speed, Docket No. 97-389, Order Approving Stipulation (June 24, 1998).

1. Whether Bell Atlantic's switch congestion planning, monitoring, and remediation efforts are adequate;
2. Why customers in Houlton received inadequate service before efforts began to relieve congestion;
3. Why certain areas are exceeding capacity before upgrades or other fixes are put into place; and
4. Whether Bell Atlantic has responded to individual customer complaints in a reasonable manner.

Bell Atlantic should immediately inform the Commission whether the actions it has taken with the ISP carrier in Houlton have relieved the congestion problems that have been the source of complaints by business customers in Houlton. In addition, Bell Atlantic should respond to the attached data requests within ten (10) days of this Order.

Dated at Augusta, Maine this 9th day of March, 1999.

BY ORDER OF THE COMMISSION

Dennis L. Keschl
Administrative Director

COMMISSIONERS VOTING FOR: Welch
 Nugent
 Diamond

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Advisors Data Request No. 1

I. GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

1. Please provide the response to each numbered request on a separate sheet of paper, or papers. Each sheet of paper should be three-hole punched.
2. For each response, please state (1) the name(s) and title(s) of the person(s) responsible for preparing the response, and (2) the name(s) and title(s) of the person(s) who are competent to give testimony concerning the response and all documents produced as part of the responses.
3. Where information requested is not available in the precise form described in the question, or is not available for all years indicated, please provide all information with respect to the subject matter of the question that can be identified in the Utility's Workpapers and files, or that is otherwise available.
4. As used in this data request, "available" means within the Utility's knowledge, possession, or control, or within the party's power, capacity or ability to retrieve or obtain from an affiliate, a contractor, or any other source.
5. Please file responses to oral data requests under separate cover.

II. DATA REQUESTS

Regarding BA's Houlton Switch:

1. When and how did BA become aware that customers served by the Houlton Switch were experiencing no dial tone, delayed dial tone, ringing with no one on the line, fast busy signals, inability to complete calls to hospitals, or 911 or other emergency numbers?

2. Provide all work orders related to efforts to deal with problems identified in question 1, starting from the time BA became aware of them to the present.
3.
 - a) Provide records that measure the performance of the Houlton Switch for any day the switch detected evidence of any of the problems in question 1, from the time BA became aware of those problems to the present. On each such record circle the measurements that provide that evidence.
 - b. Provide records of BA's actions to deal with the problems indicated by any switch performance records BA provides in response to question 3(a).
4. Provide records of calls made to BA's repair service by customers served by the Houlton Switch to report problems identified in question 1, from the time BA became aware of them to the present.
5. Provide records of calls made to BA's Home Market and Business Centers by Houlton customers to report problems identified in question 1, from the time BA became aware of them to the present.
6. Provide reports from BA's repair service to BA's regulatory staff and the Home Market and Business Centers apprising them of problems reported by customers in BA's Maine exchanges.
7.
 - a. Provide any company documents that specify the threshold levels of problems identified in question 1 that must be reported by customers, or measured by a switch's performance reports, to cause BA to conclude the condition to be unsafe and to take emergency action to relieve it.
 - b. BA-ME President Dinan's 23 February 1999 letter to the Commission indicates the problems the Houlton Switch is causing customers are being caused by Internet traffic.
 - i. Provide evidence BA has to support
 - (1) that conclusion, and
 - (2) Mr. Dinan's assertion that "a large ISP" is "a significant contributor to this overload condition" in Houlton.
 - ii. Provide the Houlton line growth forecast for the past three years.
 - iii. What percentage of the 1998 under-forecast lines (260-140) was assigned to ISPs?

- iv. How many digital working lines is the Houlton Switch still short?
(As of 2/23/99 it was 111 lines.)
- v.
 - (1) When did BA begin negotiations for Flexpath with the "large ISP" in Houlton?
 - (2) Has BA moved the "large ISP" to Flexpath? If not, when will that occur?

Richard Kania
For the Advisory Staff

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Advisors Data Request No. 2

I. DATA REQUESTS

1. Does Bell Atlantic (BA) monitor the performance of its switches (both host and remote) on a real-time basis?
 - a) If so, please describe the types of switch activities that are monitored, how often the measurements are taken, and who at BA actually examines the data (identify by position and names).
 - b) If such a monitoring system exists, does it have an automatic "alarm" mechanism that is triggered if an abnormal condition arises?
 - c) How are standards established for such a monitoring system?
2. If a real-time monitoring system exists, please provide any reports of abnormal conditions for the Houlton switch that have occurred since July 1, 1998. Please also describe the actions taken by the Company to investigate and correct the abnormal conditions.
3. If no real-time monitoring system for switches is present, please describe any monitoring and reporting mechanisms that are in place for host and remote switches. Please respond to the same subparts as in Question #1.
4. Please provide all switch monitoring reports for the Houlton switch from July 1, 1998 to present.
5. What circumstances led to BA's decision to install two new line units in the Houlton office in November 1997?
6. Please explain fully the meaning of "add 266 digital lines by year end 1998", as stated in Mr. Dinan's letter of February 23, 1999. Is this a reference to subscriber lines, paths through the switch or something else?

7. Please fully describe the circumstances surrounding the Company's inability to meet its needs for additional equipment to meet its year-end 1998 line growth results, as stated in Mr. Dinan's February 23rd letter.

8. Was the 1998 total line gain of 260 in Houlton compared with year-end 1997 or some other date?

9. Please show the actual line growth for the Houlton switch on a monthly basis for 1998.

10. Has BA done any investigation to ascertain the cause of the higher than forecasted line growth? If so, please provide the results of that investigation.

11. Please explain specifically how moving the "large ISP" to Flexpath service will help to alleviate the switch congestion. Are there any other service offerings that would accomplish the same results? Please describe those services and how they would alleviate switch congestion.

12. Regarding the service problems experienced by New Directions, has BA concluded definitely that office congestion is not the cause of the problem? If so, what is the basis for that conclusion? If not, why should the Houlton office congestion not be explored further as the cause of the problem?

13. Please describe how BA identified congestion as a problem at the Sedgwick and Berwick switches. Please provide all details, i.e., what measurement was used, when was the congestion condition identified, and any investigation done by the Company to ascertain the cause of the problem.

14. Please describe any actions BA could take to alleviate severe switch congestion on a short-term basis, e.g., could the Company interrupt long holding time calls in order to allow other traffic to traverse the switch. Does BA have a definition of severe switch congestion, or other similar terminologies?

15. Does the Company have any procedures in place to provide guidance to its personnel as to when such procedures should be instituted, e.g., when certain blocking rates are identified?

[The point of the previous two questions is to determine if BA has the ability to ascertain extreme levels of switch congestion, and if it observes those levels, to take action to mitigate them. The company should provide information that illuminates that issue.]

16. Please identify who within BA had (has) the responsibility and the authority to initiate corrective action.

Richard Kania
For the Advisory Staff